

Review of *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music* by Jeffrey Nealon (University of Nebraska Press)

by David Arditi | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

ABSTRACT In *I'm Not Like Everybody Else*, Nealon is not like everybody else (i.e., a popoptimist), but rather dissects the position of popular music in American society and culture in the present moment. The title of the book comes from a performance by Ray Davies (former singer for the Kinks) at the Austin City Limits Music Festival in 2006. In a YouTube video of the performance, Nealon notes that when "the song's titling chorus returns, the hipster 'Keep Austin Weird' audience is shown, all in unison, chanting 'I'm Not Like Everybody Else.'" (68) It is in this example that he sees "the mass individuality logic of biopolitics in one concise screenshot: I'm ironically just like everybody else in and through my axiomatic self-assurance that I'm not like everybody else." (68) This passage perfectly sums up Nealon's thesis: through a capitalism that aims to make everyone a mass individual, people reaffirm their identity "not" being like everyone else, while at the same time failing to produce their identity positively.

KEYWORDS authenticity, biopolitics, capitalism, counterculture, culture, music, neoliberalism

Nealon, Jeffrey T. *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*. Provocations. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018, 144 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4962-0865-1. US List: \$28.

Books on popular music often degenerate into celebrations of popular music that reify artists such as Elvis Presley as "high" culture heroes, a practice Jeffrey Nealon terms "popoptimism." In *I'm Not Like Everybody Else*, Nealon is not like everybody else (i.e., a popoptimist), but rather dissects the position of popular music in American society and culture in the present moment. Nealon's book is part of the Provocations Series published by the University of Nebraska Press. As such, Nealon makes two provocative points to start the book. First, he takes Lawrence Grossberg's contention that the cultural study of popular music has been rather stagnant, and Nealon intends to "do something about" this. Second, Nealon calls for popular music to be taken seriously as a site of artistic production that has a wide-ranging impact on America's society and soul. This is a book that provokes thought about our discourse on popular music, and as such is a must read because Nealon reconfigures the terms of debate. However, in the tradition of the Provocations Book Series, I would like to further these provocations because I consider myself provoked.

The title of the book comes from a performance by Ray Davies (former singer for the Kinks) at the Austin City Limits Music Festival in 2006. In a YouTube video of the

performance, Nealon notes that when "the song's titling chorus returns, the hipster 'Keep Austin Weird' audience is shown, all in unison, chanting 'I'm Not Like Everybody Else.'" (68) It is in this example that he sees "the mass individuality logic of biopolitics in one concise screenshot: I'm ironically just like everybody else in and through my axiomatic self-assurance that I'm *not* like everybody else." (68) This passage perfectly sums up Nealon's thesis: through a capitalism that aims to make everyone a mass individual, people reaffirm their identity "not" being like everyone else, while at the same time failing to produce their identity positively. For me, this point reverberates post-modernist play with pastiche while being firmly embedded in the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture. Here is where our analysis differs.

For Nealon, following Grossberg, the concept "excorporation" defines the rock fan aesthetic as a way of "saying 'no' to some very specific things" rather than saying "yes." (55) As with the observation of Davies' concert, a strong strain of excorporation exists within rock music, especially punk (and post-punk grunge) that one is supposed to be against "the man" in an abstract way. However, Nealon contends that the excorporation contained within rock music becomes hollow when people chant that they are "not" like everybody else or they buy products to identify as resistant to mainstream culture. Personally, I picture Dr. Pepper's "One of a Kind" commercial from 2012. In this commercial, everyone becomes an individual through the consumption of Dr. Pepper, even the "Rebel" who dons a black t-shirt and walks the opposite direction from everyone else. Ironically, I teach this rejection to my popular culture students as part of a unit on the Frankfurt School to demonstrate the concept of pseudo-individualization. Nealon argues that excorporation becomes a marker one can consume in a biopolitical society that reaffirms neoliberal consumption.




While I agree with Nealon's contention that excorporation becomes a (maybe the) marker of neoliberal consumption, I was struck throughout with the timing of this move to consume excorporation. At many times throughout the book, I caught myself thinking, "yes, if this was the 1990s." Speaking with students, I walk away with the feeling that excorporation and authenticity claims (another theme of the book) no longer matter to younger popular culture consumers. Nealon leaves the reader in this strange feeling of datedness until chapter seven where he discusses the way people consume streaming playlists and Pandora stations largely through moods (something developed first by Beats Music¹). The problem is that these means of consumption do not allow one to consume through an affirmation of authenticity or saying "no" to the mainstream, but rather as a way of firmly embracing the mainstream.² I think Nealon would agree with me, but there is a degree of ambiguity in the book as he often conflates the late twentieth century with the early twenty-first century. In this way, Nealon's argument lends itself to a popoptimist approach as he excorporates certain artists and genres by repeatedly reifying particular music (especially classic punk rock) while excoriating other music (he is not a fan of Steely Dan). As someone who never understood punk music, the reification of punk and classic '70s rock (ex. Pink Floyd) struck me as no different from those who celebrate Elvis Presley.

Our main difference stems from our periodization of capitalism and society. The main argument of the book is that the present moment represents a biopolitical society different from the disciplinary society of the Fordist-era. However, the current moment seems more of an intensification of earlier logics. Again, we agree in many ways. Ben Agger uses the term "fast capitalism" to describe in the current moment of capitalism an economic system in which capital (especially in the Culture Industry) produces so many commodities that we do not have time to consume (i.e. use) what we buy.³ For Agger, we produce more

books (especially in academia) than anyone can read; for Nealon, we produce so much music that “few people are listening intently to music.” (144) These views resemble each other, but political stakes rest in their differences. If we still live in a disciplinary society, we can push back at our institutions and demand change; however, the biopolitical society, as described by Nealon, lends itself to the apolitical—something that resists change.

Unlike many popular music texts today, Nealon does not become distracted by reaffirming musicians or their fans. In many ways, the text resembles Jacques Attali’s *Noise* in its search for an original theoretical approach to popular music in our everyday lives. Nealon’s argument is provocative and worth a read.

Notes

1. David Arditi, “Digital Subscriptions: The Unending Consumption of Music in the Digital Era,” *Popular Music and Society* 41, no. 3 (2018): 302–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.126410> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.126410>> . 
2. Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, “Hearing the Contradictions: Aesthetic Experience, Music and Digitization,” *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 3 (2018): 289–302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518776517> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518776517>> . 
3. Ben Agger, *Fast Capitalism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988). 

Author Information

David Arditi

David Arditi is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Theory at the University of Texas at Arlington. His research addresses the impact of digital technology on society and culture with a specific focus on music. Arditi is author of *iTake-Over: The Recording Industry* in the digital era and his essays have appeared in *Critical Sociology*, *Popular Music & Society*, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Civilisations*, *Media Fields Journal* and several edited volumes. He also serves as Editor of *Fast Capitalism*.

[View all of David Arditi's articles.](#)

Article details

David Arditi, "Review of 'I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music' by Jeffrey Nealon (University of Nebraska Press)," *Lateral* 9.2 (2020).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L9.2.12>

This content is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is

retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053